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Presidential debates come in all shapes and sizes. The presence and length of opening statements and closing remarks, the opportunity and length of rebuttal, the nature of the questioner, and other factors have created a bewildering variety of formats. However, most scholars agree that these confrontations are not "really" debates but merely "joint press conferences." This observation raises the question of whether presidential debates should be more like "real" debates. The paper proposes six modifications in political debates based on four important principles (campaign discourse should inform voters; it should address topics that matter to voters; it should encourage candidates to distinguish themselves from competitors; and campaign discourse should facilitate "cost-benefit" analysis by voters by emphasizing "clash"). These improvements are designed to improve the ability of this important form of communication to better inform voters. (Contains 19 references.) (Author/RS)

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Let's Put "Debate" into "Presidential Debates"

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ABSTRACT

Presidential debates come in all shapes and sizes. The presence and length of opening statements and closing remarks, the opportunity and length of rebuttal, the nature of the questioner, and other factors have created a bewildering variety of formats. However, most scholars agree that these confrontations are not "really" debates but merely "joint press conferences." This observation raises the question of whether presidential debates should be more like "real" debates. I propose six modifications in political debates based on four important principles (campaign discourse should inform voters; it should address topics that matter to voters; it should encourage candidates to distinguish themselves from competitors; and campaign discourse should facilitate "cost-benefit" analysis by voters by emphasizing clash). These improvements are designed to improve the ability of this important form of communication to better inform voters.

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Scholars have deliberated about whether we should consider presidential debates to be genuine "debates" (Bitzer & Rueter, 1980; Carlin, 1989; Weiler, 1989). Auer (1962) characterized these encounters as counterfeit debates and as "a double public press conference for simultaneous interviewing" (p. 147). Jamieson and Birdsell coined the phrase "joint press conference" to describe presidential debates (1988, p. 6). Zarefsky made explicit the argument that presidential debates do not live up to their potential:

> Debates have great potential for focusing the audience's attention, for identifying issues, and for inviting deliberation. Sadly, however, this potential is largely unrealized. The [presidential] debates have been formatted for television -- the confrontation with reporter-questioners adds dramatic conflict and the short time limits respond to audience's limited attention span. But these same conventions thwart sustained discussion of serious issues; they encourage one-liners and canned mini-speeches. (1992, p. 412)

I believe that the artificial format of presidential debates, which makes them "joint press conferences" rather than true debates, is flawed. I will first argue for the importance of presidential debates, then articulate four principles for presidential debates, and finally use those principles to develop six specific suggestions for improving the format of presidential debates.

Importance of Presidential Debates

Political debates are important for three reasons. First, they give viewers an opportunity to see the principal contenders for office, meeting eye to eye, treating the same topics (Hellweg, Pfau, & Brydon, 1992). Jamieson (1987) explains that "As messages running an hour or longer, debates offer a level of contact with candidates clearly unmatched in spot ads and news segments. . . . The debates offer the most extensive and serious view of the candidates available

to the electorate" (p. 28). Voters have the opportunity to compare the candidates in a relatively extended period of time in a political debate.

Second, viewers can obtain a somewhat less contrived impression of the candidates from debates than from other forms of campaign messages. While candidates do prepare for the debates, they cannot anticipate every question from the panelists, moderators, or audience members or every remark from an opponent. Furthermore, unlike speeches or tv spots with scripts, candidates are not usually permitted to bring notes to debates. Thus, voters may obtain a somewhat more spontaneous and accurate view of the candidates in debates.

Finally, political debates routinely attract the largest audience of any campaign message form (Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988). For example, in 1964, for example, no message by either Johnson or Goldwater was seen by even a quarter of the audience that watched the first 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debates. (p. 122). Carlin develops a detailed argument about the size of the audience for presidential debates:

> Nielson (1993) reported that the second presidential debate in 1992 attracted 43.1 million television households or 69.9 million viewers. . . (p. 4). Those numbers contrast sharply to the 4.1 million homes or 20.5 million viewers who tuned in for each of the major party conventions (p. 1). In 1980, nearly 81 million people watched Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter in their only debate encounter (p. 4). Miller and MacKuen (1979) noted that 90% of the adult population watched at least one of the Kennedy-Nixon debates, and 83% watched at least one Ford-Carter match up. These numbers compared favorably to 73 percent who read about the campaigns in the paper, 4 percent who read magazines, and 45 percent who listened to radio reports (p. 328). (1994, pp. 6-7)

The large size of the audience for presidential debates means that opportunity for influence from these campaign messages is substantial.

Is this potential for influence realized? Hellweg, Pfau, and Brydon concluded that "most studies suggest debate viewing contributes to considerable learning about the candidates and their positions" (1992, pp. 106-107). Research has found that presidential debates can influence many voters. Middleton (1962) indicated that the 1960 Nixon-Kennedy debates were "extremely important" for the voting decision of one out of eight voters. Roper (1960) reported that 4 million viewers changed their voting intention on the basis of the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debates. Chaffee concluded that some voters have been affected by presidential debates:

> Those [voters] who were the most regular viewers changed the most in their voting intentions, were the ones least influenced by dispositional factors, and were the most likely to vote in conformance with policy differences they perceived between themselves and the candidates. (1978, p. 341)

Debates may also affect the outcome of elections. Wayne asserted that "Kennedy and Carter might not have won without the debates" (1992, p. 229). Kelley (1983) indicated that about one-fifth of voters reported that they had decided how to vote after watching the Carter-Reagan debate. Kirk, reported that "focus groups and exit polls told us that more people based their decision in 1992 on the debates than any other single means of information throughout the course of the campaign" (1995). So, research strongly suggests that presidential debates can influence voters and election outcomes.

However, Jamieson and Birdsell (1988) asserted that "debates don't very often convert partisans on one side to the other" (p. 161). While this statement is true, debates can influence elections without converting partisans, by persuading undecided voters to favor one candidate

(Carlin, 1994; Pfau & Kang, 1991). Zakahi and Hacker (1995) provided concrete evidence on the margin of victory in several elections:

> In 1960, John Kennedy beat Richard Nixon by about 100,000 popular votes. This is a fraction of a percentage (0.2%) of the total vote. In 1968, Nixon defeated Hubert Humphrey by 500,000 votes (0.7%). In 1976, Jimmy Carter won by less than 2% of the popular vote. Polls in late September of 1976 showed an unusually large number of undecided voters (Reinhold, 1976). In 1980, Ronald Reagan beat Carter by less than 10% of the popular vote, yet two weeks before the election, 25% of the voters were still undecided. (p. 100)

The number of voters who are neither Republicans nor Democrats has increased substantially: The proportion of independents has risen from 22.6% in 1952 to 38.0% in 1992 (Weisberg & Kimball, 1993). Neither political party enjoys a majority of citizens, so it is not possible to win the presidency without persuading millions of these voters. Thus, presidential debates clearly merit our attention.

Principles for Better Campaign Discourse

I will articulate four principles that inform my suggestions for improving the format of presidential debates. First, campaign discourse (including presidential debates) ought to inform voters. Voters are the ones who choose the president. The essence of democracy is for voters to select who will represent them in their government. This means that campaigns should be designed to encourage candidates to provide voters with information on which to base their voting decisions.

Second, campaign discourse should inform voters about issues that matter to voters rather than to others. It would be a waste of time for two candidates to wax eloquent about foreign

policy toward Albania if no one in the electorate cares about Albania. On the other hand, if voters care passionately about public education, candidates can help them make their voting decision by discussing education. I don't mean to imply that candidates should not be allowed to try to influence what the public believes are key issues; my point is that campaign discourse should not ignore the issues that matter to the public.

Third, a presidential debate should serve to highlight the differences between candidates. By definition, voting is a comparative act: One cannot choose between two (or more) candidates who appear the same. The only possible basis for choosing between candidates are differences between them. Thus, debates should encourage candidates to display the differences that allow voters to choose.

Fourth, for voting decisions to best resemble cost-benefit analysis, formats should encourage clash (acclaims, attacks, and defenses) on both policy and character. Of course, attacks (and other utterances as well) should not distort the record. In my opinion (and I think this claim is debatable), candidates should not discuss their private lives. However, we need to learn both the pros (which candidates are eager to report to voters) and the cons (which only opponents will tell voters) of the candidates to choose the best person for the office. Similarly, we need to be able to trust candidates to follow through with their campaign promises, so some character issues are relevant. Only with attack and defense (as well as acclaims) can we get clash.

Suggestions for an Improved Debate Format

I will advance six specific suggestions for improving the format of presidential debates. They do not all need to be implemented together, which is important because candidates may resist some suggestions more than others.

- **(1) Debates should focus on a single topic.**

Within reason, the more narrow the topic of debate the better (domestic issues, for example, should be considered too broad). It is unrealistic to expect candidates to be prepared to address thoughtfully, in an extemporaneous debate, any conceivable topic. When the topics is not restricted, that inevitably has the effect of encouraging the candidates to prepare superficially for many topics. When topics are restricted, candidates have the opportunity to prepare more thoroughly and to do a better job of informing the electorate. Of course, candidates may object about the narrowing of topics (for example, it seems possible that in 1996 Clinton would have benefitted more from a debate on education than Dole). Choosing narrower topics for presidential debates is likely to improve the information available to voters on those topics.

- **(2) Debates should feature as topics the issues most important to voters.**

Debate topics should not be chosen at random (or by the whims of journalists). Instead, I propose that the topics of presidential debates should be chosen that reflect the issues most important to voters. How better to inform voters than forcing candidates to address the issues that matter most to voters? This can give voters a choice to learn more about the topic(s) that are most important to them.

- **(3) Debates should encourage clash between the candidates.**

Candidates should be given the opportunity to make statements (in alternating order), to refute their opponents' positions, and to defend their own positions. Clash, in which we hear both candidates refute and defend, is important for voters to be able to distinguish between the candidates. Alternating which candidate answers a question may show the differences between the candidates, but encouraging direct clash will make that more likely. This means the format should not discourage attacks (although it can discourage inappropriate attacks). Direct clash

will highlight contrasts between candidates, making it easier for voters to see the differences between them, and facilitating their voting choice.

- **(4) Questions, when they are used, should come from voters, not journalists.**

In my opinion, journalists should report the news, not create it. I think it would be difficult for a journalist to retain his or her objectivity when faced with the opportunity to "get" a candidate (well, I don't actually believe that that anyone can be completely objective, so it is better to say that the opportunity to question candidates may exacerbate their natural subjectivity). Furthermore, given that debates are staged to help voters decide between the candidates, it makes more sense to use questions from voters as prompts for candidate statements. This procedure will make it more likely that debates will focus on the issues that matter most to voters.

- **(5) Candidates should be permitted to question one another.**

Candidates who are well-prepared will know the places where their opponents are most vulnerable. This will facilitate clash among the candidates. Skillful questioning has the potential to pin down elusive rhetors (although it, like other forms of discourse, can be abused). Thus, it can help give the electorate information about the candidates and differences in their positions that might not emerge without questions.

- **(6) Debates should have a limited number of participants.**

One of the problems I see with primary debates (especially early in the campaign) is that they often feature as many as nine candidates. We cannot expect voters to be able to contrast that many candidates at once (especially if the debate has no restriction on topics). This is a clear example of information overload. We must balance competing interests here: the more candidates who participate, the more choices given to the electorate; the more candidates, the

more difficult it is for voters to compare them all. Personally, I'd rather see two or three debates among three or four candidates than one debate with nine candidates. Note that voters would have a choice about which debates (with which candidates) to watch. This procedure will facilitate voter learning about candidates.

Together, these changes will probably improve the quality of presidential debates. Debates ought to inform the voters, treat topics that matter to voters, highlight the differences between candidates, and encourage clash on issues of policy and character. These changes ought to result in a better informed electorate and better voting decisions.

Some people are not aware that primary debates have a longer history than general debates (Davis, 1997). The first primary debate featured Thomas Dewey and Harold Stassen in 1948. Apparently Stevenson debated Kefauver in 1956. Kennedy warmed up for the Nixon-Kennedy debates by contesting Humphrey in a primary debate. I find it ironic that these debates employed, arguably, superior formats. Dewey and Stassen debated a topic (that communism should be outlawed in the United States) and featured constructives and rebuttals with no questions. Kennedy and Humphrey had constructives and rebuttals. While they did have questions, they had been submitted by citizens rather than reporters. It is unfortunate that we strayed from our roots into the formats used today.

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